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ESCUELA POLITÉCNICA SUPERIOR Alicante University

Carretera San Vicente del Raspeig s/n 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig. Alicante (SPAIN)

eurau@ua.es

The beguinages: Cities within cities

Analysis of other hybrid types in the medieval city

Martínez-Millana, Elena¹

1. Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Departamento de Proyectos Arquitectónicos,
Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Madrid, Spain.
elena.martinez.millana@upm.es

Synopsis

This research explores domesticity in beguinages, these architectural organisations can be analysed as different medieval hybrid types, even more, as cities in their own right as well as cities within others. They emerged in the European medieval cities in the thirteenth century, and were inhabited by the beguines for almost eight centuries. This research aims to move forward towards a more architectural and gender perspective here by retrieving, revising and relating the work done by other investigators. This paper shows that it is possible to find in the past, the emergence of these new individuals (women) that break with the way of life based on the nuclear family and that have the will to transform the spatial conditions they inhabit, the house and the city that they have inherited. So that, this research intends to demonstrate how women were effective and the fact that this human-space relationship occurred with a gender perspective. Two issues are analysed, which reinforced each other: the changes they made in the spatial properties of the places they lived in and the multiple-uses that were in the beguinages, so these complexes served the needs of the larger community. Some of the architectural strategies employed in the beguinages that are recaptured and described here, contribute to enable us to better understand the complex genealogy of domesticity and must be incorporated in the historiography of the house and the western world, so that it is not only construed from the masculine experience. This research shows how women updated the existing domesticity by means of the beguinages, construed as cities within cities, as are heterotopias, in the Middle Ages. The work intends to value its usefulness by perceiving the past as it is, an immense ocean of knowledge weighed against the illusion of progress that ignores that which preceded it.

Key words: City, domesticity, intimacy, gender, Middle Ages.

1. Introduction

The beguine communities started to develop in numerous cities during the thirteenth century in the region of Lage Landen or Le Pays-Bas, which is now occupied by the present countries: Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg, areas of the north of France and western Germany. The main cause of their emergence, as explained by Sarah Joan Moran in *'Unconventional Women: Religion, Politics, and Image in the Court Beguinages 1585-1713'*, was the development of the cities in the High Middle Ages which encouraged many women to migrate to them in search of work.

During the first decades of its existence, between 1230-60, the number of inhabitants of these communities rose to hundreds, in some cases they reached a thousand. This was a contrasting figure when compared to the monasteries and convents at the time, which was much lower, as noted by Walter P. Simons in *'Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries'*, 1200-1560. Unlike these other communities, the beguines were accessible to many women as they allowed property ownership rights and the right to work for self-finance.

2. The beguinages: Cities within cities

The beguinage, begijnhof or béguinage, in Dutch and French, is the architectural complex which was inhabited by communities of beguines. Although the first were built outside the cities and within their own walls for protection, as Olijslager describes in *'The Groot Begijnhof of Leuven'*, that a short time later they started to settle on the inside, or as the city expanded they ended up being within the city walls. For this reason, the beguinages can be analysed from their origin as architectural complexes that emerged within the medieval cities, even more, this human-space relationship occurred with a gender perspective.

Although these beguine communities disappeared by the end of the twentieth century, from the three hundred beguinages that were accounted for in 1566, many still remain. The beguinages were inhabited by women for almost eight centuries. Ernest W. McDonnell explains in *'The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture'*, that they were formed without central coordination or a sole founder and that many were inter-connected through medieval pathways. This research aims to move forward towards a more architectural and gender perspective here by retrieving, revising and relating the work done by other investigators.

Therefore, this paper intends to show how women were effective in the transformation of the house and the city they had inherited through two reflections that reinforce each other. On the one hand, by analysing the changes they made in the spatial properties of the places they lived in; on the other hand, evidencing the benefits and challenges of sharing space by means of the multiple-uses that were in the beguinages, so these complexes served the needs of the larger community. The hypothesis is that beguinages emerged as cities in their own right as well as cities within others.

3. The domesticity within the beguinages: Other medieval hybrid types

The beguinages were very heterogeneous in their formal configuration, but they had in common diverse mechanisms of setting up and so it is possible to identify the following organisations:

3.1. City Transformation Type 1:

Organised houses around a large central square or garden, with the facade facing the city, being the rear wall. The beguinage in Amsterdam founded in 1345 is an example of this configuration (Fig. 1-2-3).

In the engraving of the city of Amsterdam from 1572 (Fig. 1, zoom) one can see the beguinage architectural complex in relation to the city. The reversal of the access to the houses was the main feature that allowed the complex as a whole, to be used from its interior.

Another engraving of the beguinage from 1544 shortly before (Fig. 3), shows an isolated beguinage. In it, the city from which it was formed is hidden, but the doors of the traditional houses can be seen and although they are not accessible, its condition of a city within a city prevails.



Figure 1. Figure 2. Figure 3.

3.2. City Transformation T. 2:

Houses arranged along streets within a separate walled area. Examples of these are the beguinage in Brussels founded in the thirteenth century (Fig.4-5), or the one in Ghent founded in 1271 (Fig. 6-7).



Figure 4. Figure 5.

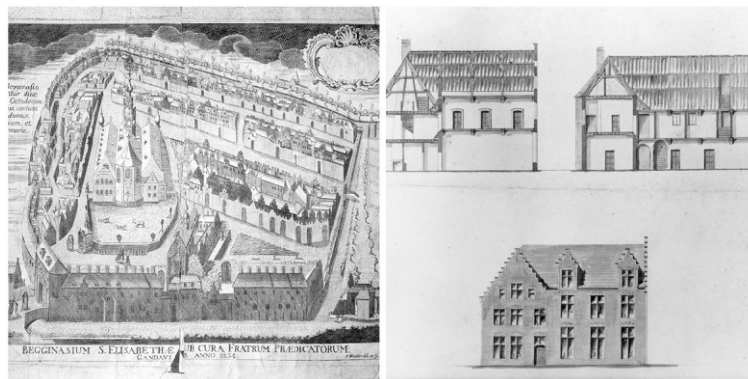


Figure 6. Figure 7.

In the engraving of Ghent, one can see that the access door to the interior of the beguinage is open and inside there are beguines and laypeople. Even though the beguinage was constituted as a city within another, it was not always closed shut.

The beguinages transformed the conditions of use of the courtyards and created an interiority meaning, the space of intimacy extended from the house to the city, the space to which all other inhabitants had access to.

3.3. City Transformation T. 3:

As a counterpoint, it is interesting to analyse the configuration of those smaller scaled beguinages that were reproduced and multiplied in the same city.

For example in Cambrai after the disappearance of the first beguinage, that of Sainte Ursule founded in 1239, up to six beguinages were founded and dispersed throughout the city. The one shown here is the beguinage of Saint Vaast, founded in 1545 (Fig. 8-9-10).

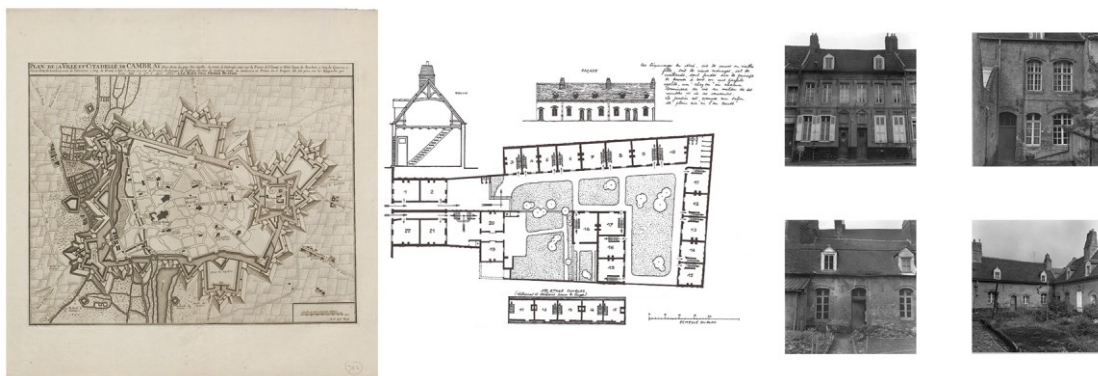


Figure 8. Figure 9. Figure 10.

These classifications show the diverse configuration modes of the beguinages and the fact that all of them started from an inherited city. The traditional house type is the basis or structure from which the beguinage is defined, thereby maintaining the city's traditional relationship between house and city. It is therefore possible to find in them the capacity of the 'type' and its combination to form multiple developments from topological considerations, hence its particular

heterogeneity and mutability.

4. Gender and domesticity in the Middle Ages

The beguinages, like the monasteries and the convents, can be considered as diverse types of medieval hybrids; nevertheless, the beguinages clearly constitute a different model: carried out by secular women and configured from the existing city — the vernacular dwellings—. This analysis raises fundamental questions on projectual methodological issues about type and topological considerations in the consolidated city before Modernity, aside from reductionist visions.

Notion of 'type', which has been so used and abused, regains, its definition as "structure of the form which is capable of multiple developments, not only as a mere mechanism of reproduction"¹ that Rafael Moneo develops in '*On Typology*'. This definition is closer to that which Quatremère de Quincy gave in the second half of the eighteenth century in the '*Dictionnaire historique d'architecture*', than the redefinitions that are the abusive result made from research and residential production of the modern culture.

This extract shows two main configuration modes of the beguinages in the medieval cities of Amsterdam and Brussels; with these, one can see the variety of compositions that could be adopted within their perimeters. Sarah Joan Moran, in '*On Locked Doors and Open Windows*,' explains that the houses that constituted the beguinages go from beguines to laypeople and vice versa with apparent ease. The beguines bought adjacent houses or sold them according to their funds.

The mixed-use spaces within these architectural complexes together with the opening of them to the other citizens were justified by the need to support themselves economically. As specialist researchers have demonstrated, the beguines worked washing, cooking, grinding, making beer, textiles, laundering, amongst others. Moreover, as Daphne Spain explains in '*The Importance of Gendered Spaces for the Public Realm*,' they achieved public importance by caring for the sick, the elderly and the poor, and contributing on the education of the women.

All these aspects give rise to the radical singularity of the domesticity of the beguinages, which is that they were constitutes as unfinished architectural complexes that could vary by growing or reducing in size. In them, the location of the majority of the elements was circumstantial, versatile and flexible and therefore in their configuration, far from following a strict pattern of functional organisation, they took into account other topological variables. Some of these issues point out the virtues and shortcoming of past and current domesticity.

The beguinages can actually be useful to have a more in-depth knowledge about the relationship between domesticity and gender, "*what has been*."² They

¹ MONEO, Rafael, 1978. "On Typology," *Oppositions*, no. 1, p. 188-211.

² BENJAMIN, Walter, 1999. "N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, p.462. "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein *what has been* comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation." [Awakening. N2a,3]

should be included in the historiography of the house in western culture, to enable a deeper understanding of the complex genealogy of domesticity, so that it is not only construed from the masculine experience. In conclusion, it has been possible to show how women updated the existing domesticity by means of the beguinages, construed as cities within cities, as are heterotopias, in the Middle Ages.

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Biography

Elena Martinez-Millana. Studied architecture at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain, and l'École d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais, France (2013). She has collaborated in architectural offices such as UAPS, Paris and OAB, Catalonia. She has a Master in Advanced Architectural Design from the Polytechnic University of Madrid (2015), and is PhD Fellow in the Architectural Design Department, Collective Housing Research Group (GIVCO) —supported by European Social Fund and the Community of Madrid—. Her doctoral thesis is “Disassembling Domesticity: Habiting Heterotopias” under Andrés Cánovas. She has participated in conferences: “Le Corbusier, 50 years after, International Congress” (2015), “IV Workshop on Educational Innovation in Architecture (JIDA)” (2016), “III International Conference on Gender and Architecture (MORE)”, “I International Conference in Architectural Communication (COCA)”, “I International Congress on Architecture Doctorates (IDA)” (2017), “III International Conference on Architectural Design & Criticism (Critic|all)” (2018), amongst others. Her doctoral thesis has been selected for the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2018).